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Bulgaria Knew of Plot on Pope, CIA Concludes

Sofia Had Advance Information, but Neither It Nor Moscow Instigated Attack, Agency Believes

By ROBERT C. TOTH, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—The Central Intelligence Agency has concluded—with what is said to be 99% certainty—that officials of the Bulgarian government had advance knowledge of the assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II by Turkish terrorist Mehmet Ali Agca, with whom Bulgarian intelligence agents were working in Rome.

However, the CIA is also convinced that neither the Bulgarians nor the Soviet Union instigated the attack, which occurred 20 months ago, agency officials have said in reports within the U.S. government.

No "smoking gun," or absolute proof of Bulgarian complicity has been found by U.S. intelligence officials. Nonetheless, *The Times* has learned, CIA specialists believe that Bulgarian intelligence agents knew Agca was bent on killing the Pope but regarded him as an unstable person who probably would be captured.

'Accessories Before the Fact'

Thus, CIA analysts have reasoned, the Bulgarians would not have actively involved themselves in Agca's plotting, even if they had been interested in such an assassination.

"The CIA conclusion makes the Bulgarians—and by extension the Soviets, who control the Bulgarians—accessories before the fact," a source said. "It dilutes their guilt, but not very much."

If this CIA assessment of the still-simmering controversy is adopted by the White House, President Reagan would probably still feel free to take part in a summit meeting with Soviet leader Yuri V. Andropov—something an American President would have found difficult to do if direct Soviet involvement in an attack on the Pope had been established.

Andropov was head of the Soviet

secret police and intelligence network, the KGB, when John Paul was shot. Thus, Andropov would have had the ultimate responsibility for the attack if—as some have alleged—the KGB had ordered the killing of the Polish Pope because of his support of the Polish independent trade union Solidarity against the Communist regime in Warsaw.

"Reagan could never meet Andropov if it was proved unequivocally that the Bulgarians, and therefore the Soviet KGB, was behind the plot to kill the Pope," a U.S. official said. "Even if a strategic arms agreement were negotiated, it would be politically impossible for Reagan to sit down with Andropov."

"It would be like the U-2 affair in

reverse," another American official said, "a watershed in Soviet-American relations that would have effects for a decade."

After the American U-2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960, Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev withdrew an invitation to President Dwight D. Eisenhower to visit Moscow. It was not until 12 years later, in 1972, that Richard M. Nixon became the first postwar U.S. President to go to the Soviet Union.

The extremely sensitive nature of a possible Bulgarian-Soviet link to the assassination attempt has led to suggestions by some intelligence analysts that the United States is deliberately steering away from blaming the Kremlin for the attack on the Pope to avoid worsening Soviet-American relations. Marvin Kalb, the NBC News correspondent who has been in the forefront in reporting the "Bulgarian connection," said in a broadcast last week that CIA officials in Rome have actively discouraged reporters from pursuing the issue.

Anti-Communism a Factor

The Administration's deep anti-communism and antipathy to Moscow would seem likely to push it toward exposing the Soviets for such a terrorist act, however, instead of trying to cover it up, a U.S. official said. And there are indications that senior Administration officials moved in that direction, at least initially.

For example, Alexander M. Haig Jr., who was secretary of state when the shooting occurred and who viewed the Kremlin as the prime supporter of international terrorism, ordered an urgent search for evidence of Soviet complicity even before the first signs of a "Bulgarian connection" appeared.

CIA Director William J. Casey was reportedly sympathetic last year to arguments, brought back from Rome by an influential Senate Intelligence Committee staff member, that the Soviets ultimately were guilty of the crime.

Several criticisms of the CIA conclusions have been made by U.S. officials and others. For one thing, very little evidence has been unearthed to connect Agca to gun and drug trafficking, unlike the other main Bulgarian and Turkish characters involved, it was said. There is overwhelming evidence, on the other hand—including his admitted assassination of a moderate Turkish editor—that Agca could be hired to kill.

Would Protect Security

More broadly, critics of the CIA assessment find it implausible that the Bulgarians would have permitted such an operation to go forward if they believed Agca was likely to get caught and thus might expose his links, whatever their nature, to Bulgarian intelligence.

Publicly, the CIA has had no comment on stories dealing with the issue. The matter is an international legal issue in the hands of the Italian government, a spokesman said.

According to sources, this is a government-wide policy based on a decision made at the highest levels of the Administration several months ago that no American impetus would be given to the assassination story for fear that it would play into Soviet hands.

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"Moscow was already calling it a CIA plot, and for us to push the story in any way would suggest that we were behind it," a source explained.

There is no doubt that the CIA has been following the issue intensively, through its agents in Europe, its contacts with the Italian and other friendly intelligence agencies and its analytic experts here.

Chose Not to Stop It

Its conclusions, which have been discussed with key members of the Administration as well as a handful of congressmen, are said to include:

—There is 99% certainty that the Bulgarians—and by inference the Soviet KGB, which has controlling ties to the Bulgarian intelligence agency—knew that Agca intended to shoot the Pope but apparently chose not to stop him. Agca's public threat to kill the Pope during John Paul's visit to Turkey a year earlier had been front-page news because Agca was already a convicted assassin who had broken out of prison.

—The three Bulgarians who have been implicated—one now in an Italian jail and two who refuse to return from Bulgaria for questioning by Italian authorities—were intelligence agents with whom Agca was working on some unknown matter. Presumably, it involved drugs and arms smuggling. Bulgarian intelligence is said to be heavily involved in such smuggling in cooperation with Turkish right-wingers, including Bekir Celenk, who allegedly offered Agca \$1.2 million to kill the Pope.

—Agca was "a known crazy," according to one U.S. official, and too unstable to be included in an assassination plot, let alone trusted to do the shooting, and almost certain to be caught. "Agca was operating in cooperation with the Bulgarians but they were not his employer," a source familiar with the CIA's views said.

Circumstantial Evidence Only

However, these conclusions rest solely on circumstantial evidence and on its analysis, not on any facts known only to American intelligence, it was emphasized. The odds are overwhelming that the truth will never be known with 100% certainty, several sources said.

Within the last week, two news items have added intrigue to the bizarre story.

The first item was a Tass news agency denial of any Soviet involvement in the case. It included an attack on three Western journalists for publicizing the allegations: Claire Sterling, who first raised the possibility of a Bulgarian connection in a Reader's Digest article; former State Department anti-terrorism specialist Michael Ledeen and Robert Moss, a British journalist.

NBC's Kalb was not mentioned, which tends to add credibility to the facts as well as the tone of his reporting. He has said that "a great deal of evidence," although some is circumstantial, links the attempted killing of the Pope "to the political and diplomatic needs of Red Square. A Soviet connection is strongly suggested, but it cannot be proved."

The second item, a New York Times article, said that Paul B. Henze, a former CIA station chief in Turkey, was hired by the Reader's Digest after the shooting to investigate Agca's background. His research was used in Sterling's account. Henze was quoted as saying that he later sold his research to NBC News and to Newsweek, the Times article said, adding that the New York Times also paid a fee for Henze's research material.

Kalb said that Henze's research contributed only about 5% to his two hourlong programs. He said he suspected that it was also of minor value to the Reader's Digest.

Nonetheless, the fact of Henze's contribution may be used by the Soviets to support their claim that allegations of a "Bulgarian connection" were a CIA plot from the start, according to some U.S. officials.